

THE DELIGHT OF GOD

January 14, 2007

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Psalm 36:1-10

John 2:1-11

Isaiah 62:1-8

**“You shall be called My Delight Is in Her . . .
for the Lord delights in you.”
Isaiah 62:4 (NRSV)**

What is the chief end of man?
Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1643

We are not meant to cringe before God. We are to enjoy all the delights
the Lord has given to us, sunsets and sunrises, and a baby's first laugh,
and friendship and love, and the brilliance of the stars.

Madeline L'Engle
A Stone for a Pillow

*We come, O God, on the first day of a new week, early in a new year,
expecting, hoping for newness, for renewal of spirit, energy, and hope.
So come to us. Startle us with your truth; open our hearts to your creative
love.*

In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of my favorite slices of life around this church happens almost every Saturday. On many Saturdays it happens several times. It is the moment at the end of a wedding ceremony when the doors open and the wedding literally spills out of the sanctuary onto the busy Michigan Avenue sidewalk. First come the guests, dressed elegantly, sometimes black tie, mingling with Saturday afternoon shoppers and tourists, causing a small traffic jam but nobody seems to mind. Next come the parents and the rest of the wedding party. Finally the bride and groom emerge. People stop in their tracks to watch. There are audible oohs and aahs and always applause. If there are pictures in the Garth, people gather on the sidewalk to watch and often offer best wishes, good luck, and blessings.

It's a great moment. But, frankly, weddings are not always the easiest slice of life around the church. For one thing, lots of people want to be married here. We receive phone calls regularly: "Hello, Reverend. We're being married on June 10. We have the Four Seasons reserved, and the band is booked, but we don't have a church yet. We thought it would be real convenient if we got married in your church: it's just across the street and it's so beautiful with that long aisle. And, by the way, what kind of church is it?"

Weddings can be complicated. We have a wedding coordinator on the staff to manage the process, and it is no simple matter. Lots can go wrong—and does. The ushers are late for rehearsal. The maid of honor left her dress in the hotel room. The flowers aren't here yet. The groom forgot the license.

Lots can go wrong. And lots can go right—and always does. Many people cry at weddings, not just the mother of the bride, the father, too. Sometimes the bride cries; sometimes the groom cries; sometimes both cry. The minister knows to have a clean handkerchief handy. Tears of happiness. Tears of joy. Afterward, one of the things that always goes right is the reception, the party. Remarkable events, they serve as a family reunion, two reunions, in fact. They bring together a group of individuals, most of whom have nothing in common with one another other than their relationship with the bride or groom. And on that basis alone they become a very happy community whose sole purpose is to rejoice, celebrate, have fun. Someone observed that a good, robust wedding party is a good representation of the kingdom of God.

One time Jesus attended a wedding. Wedding celebrations went on for days, not just a few hours. There was plenty of eating and drinking, dancing and singing. There was lots of laughter. And at this particular wedding, one of the worst possible things that could happen, happened. The wine ran out. Can you imagine? The steward—the wedding coordinator—is in a panic. The groom is embarrassed. The bride is getting angry. Both sets of parents are irritated that their son and daughter hadn't made better plans. It's not pretty.

Jesus and his new disciples and his mother are there, at Cana, nine miles from Nazareth. Mary, sensing the disaster that is unfolding, essentially says to Jesus, "Do something." His response is a little testy. He says, essentially, "Mother! It's not my problem, or yours either for that matter." And then he does it.

Every home had a large stone jar, twenty to thirty gallons, to hold the water required in a Jewish home for purification purposes, for hand washing before and after meals, and for washing cups and utensils. For some reason there are six of them.

“Fill them,” he says. “Fill them all to the top.” The wait staff does it. “Let the steward taste it.” The steward does: tastes it, calls the groom over, and observes a lovely surprise. “This is really good wine, a lot better, in fact, than what we’ve been serving.”

That’s it. The party goes on. It is a sign, the author of the Fourth Gospel says: a sign of Jesus’ glory.

Some have trouble with the idea of Jesus producing such a prodigious amount of alcohol. It has been argued that it wasn’t wine at all but unfermented grape juice. But the text calls it wine, and the Bible is consistently realistic about wine’s benefits and dangers. Of course it was wine. And it was a lot—maybe 180 gallons. I’ve never seen that much wine other than on a winery tour, or the time we visited a vineyard in Italy that supplied the families of the village with their table wine and watched, on Saturday morning, as grandmothers, dressed in black, carried five gallon gasoline cans to the farm, where there was a large tank and where the farmer cheerfully filled the plastic gasoline cans from a huge nozzle, just like at a gas station.

It was a lot of wine. It was Jesus’ gift of joy and happiness and celebration.

Some get stuck with the miracle itself. But the miracle itself is not the point. Jesus is. Jesus and his generous, remarkable, and so-very-down-to-earth, human love. Jesus is the point and the suggestion that what he is doing has something to do with the nature of God.

I love something Wendell Berry, poet and farmer, wrote: “Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine, which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater miracle and still continuing miracle by which water with soil and sunlight is turned into grapes” (*The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, p. 311).

I discovered something Dwight Moody, our neighbor, founder of Moody Bible Institute and friend of Fourth Church Pastor John Timothy Stone, said on the subject. Moody was a great evangelist and stressed the power of Jesus to change lives. He told the story of a recent convert who said, “I don’t know whether or not Jesus can turn water into wine, but I know that in my home he has turned whiskey into milk and furniture” (Lamar Williamson, *Preaching the Gospel of John*, p. 28).

The story of Jesus and the wedding at Cana contains, when you think about it, two important and somewhat surprising ideas. The first is that the gospel

of Jesus Christ, the Christian religion, has to do with human life at its most human. Distinguished New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson says, "This story of Jesus' abundant provision for a joyful feast [leads] us also to meet Jesus in the common joys of life" (*Preaching the Gospel of John*, p. 26).

Somewhere in our history we got that wrong. In the Old Testament, religion is a worldly, lusty, life-affirming, life-loving matter. It has to do with the rudimentary, ordinary processes of daily life: farming, herding, eating, drinking, living, loving, birthing, and dying. Historians and theologians say that early Christianity forgot its own beginnings within Judaism and instead fell under the influence of the Greeks. The Greeks were inclined to be otherworldly, not this-worldly. The Greeks were inclined to divide reality into two separate spheres, matter and spirit, and to conclude that religion had to do with spirit and soul but not body. Under the influence of the Greeks, early Christianity decided that the human body and its appetites and hungers, its needs and passion, was not to be trusted, certainly not to be celebrated. In fact, it was to be denied, negated. Celibacy was obviously a better idea. So was "mortification of the flesh," a strenuous physical and spiritual discipline involving deliberate infliction of pain and suffering on your own body. Dan Brown's albino monk, Simon, in *The Da Vinci Code*, in his cell at night, flagellating himself with a hand whip, tightening a band of sharp metal around his leg until it bleeds, is an exaggerated but not entirely spurious expression of the idea.

It's where we got the idea that faithful Christianity is about self-denial, self-negation, and that pleasure of any kind is at least suspect. Puritanism, H. L. Mencken said, is "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" ("Sententiæ," *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 1920).

And here is Jesus at a wedding. Here is the Fourth Gospel introducing us to Jesus at a party, where he's not there to say the prayer before the meal but to provide the wine so that the celebration can continue, so that everyone can have a good time.

C. S. Lewis's classic *Screwtape Letters* is a fictional correspondence between a senior and junior devil on the topic of winning a man's soul and preventing him from becoming a Christian. The Senior Devil instructs the Junior Devil that pleasure is God's invention and that joy is its result. He goes on to observe that joy is frequently expressed in the detestable art humans call music and occurs in heaven. Laughter, the devil says, is "disgusting and a direct insult to the realism, dignity, and austerity of hell" (pp. 57-58).

God does not despise your humanness, your humanity, and neither should you. That's first, and the second intriguing idea that emerges from this story is that joy is central to Christian faith. Here, too, we seem to forget our

beginnings. Religion, quite simply, is not always very joyful. Conrad Hyers, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College, wrote a book with the wonderful title *And God Created Laughter* in which he observes that “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Paul and Jesus is imagined to be totally humorless, infinite in gravity. The overwhelming bias has been to associate God and religion primarily with the serious side, preferably our most serious moments. We see ourselves as most religious and reverential when we are at our dreariest and dullest” (p.4).

Sometimes we Presbyterians are referred to as “God’s Frozen People” or with a Calvinist twist “God’s Frozen-Chosen People.” Sometimes the word *Presbyterian* itself is a synonym for grim, stern, somber piety.

A friend sent me a copy of an article in *The Economist* on the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in our country and throughout the world, particularly South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life reports there are more than 500 million Pentecostals and that it is the fastest growing religious movement in the world. In fact, there is a feature article on the phenomenon of Pentecostalism on the front page of the *New York Times* this morning. Describing a small but very alive storefront Pentecostal church in Harlem, it notes, “Religion here is not some sober, introspective journey or Sunday chore, but a raucous communal celebration that spills throughout the week.” The academic community that a generation ago dismissed religion as irrelevant and dying is now paying attention, trying to learn the reasons for this phenomenal growth. Harvard’s Harvey Cox thinks it has to do with joy—and the joylessness of a lot of religion: the “ecstasy deficit” he calls it.

And here is Jesus bringing the gift of joy and celebration to a wedding party. The deeper implication is that in him, his coming into this world, his coming into your life and mine at its most human, is something so good, so profoundly, deeply and powerfully good that the only appropriate response is joy.

There is a lot of it in the Bible. There is a lot of hand clapping and cymbal crashing and trumpet blowing and singing and dancing in the Psalter. When wise men see a star, they follow with great joy. When angels appear to shepherds on the hillside, they announce a great joy for all people.

When frightened disciples find an empty tomb at dawn on the first day of the week, they are afraid and then rejoice.

It is not a superficial joy in the Bible, a denial of tragedy, a refusal to be realistic, a Pollyannaish optimism that everything is just fine. Rather joy in the Bible comes in the midst of difficult and trying and sometimes tragic circumstances: exile, loneliness, persecution, suffering, death even. In all of

it, God's people continue to be joyful. And why? Not because their circumstances are wonderful, but because of the promise that regardless of circumstance, God will not let go, will not abandon, but will be with God's people—wherever they are, whatever is happening to them.

Somehow, someone managed to scrawl on the external wall of the Warsaw Ghetto:

I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.
I believe in love, even when I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if I do not see him.

In our own national experience, in the midst of legally mandated segregation and deeply embodied institutional and social racism, Christian preachers such as Martin Luther King Jr. rose up, not only to challenge the law in acts of courageous civil disobedience, but also to challenge African American people to remember who they were and whose they were.

And the result—even in the midst of slavery and discrimination and persecution and lynching—was a literature and poetry and a music utterly and authentically joyful. “My Lord! What a morning, when the stars begin to fall.” “Go tell it on the mountain.” “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.” And James Weldon Johnson’s wonderful anthem “Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven sing, ring with the harmony of liberty. Let our rejoicing rise—high as the listening skies. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.”

We ought not be Pollyannaish. In fact, it is a time for realism. The news has not been good recently. To be alive is to be intellectually and emotionally worried about our nation, our future. To be alive is to grieve the loss of precious American lives and precious Iraqi lives and, whether or not you agree with the president’s new policy to commit more troops, to lament the continuing and additional loss of life that it will inevitably mean.

And for some, personal news is not good: illness; a sudden, unexpected, out-of-the-blue diagnosis; aging; risky surgery; relationships that are not fulfilling; employment that is disappointing and fragile.

And the promise is that into precisely those so very human places, places where you and I are most human—where our deepest hopes and fears reside, our strongest passions, our dearest love—it is precisely into those places that Jesus Christ comes with transforming power.

The news is good, so utterly and profoundly good. Jesus came to a wedding, Jesus provided wine to keep the celebration going.

Incredibly, contrary to what you may have concluded long ago, God delights in you and will never let you go. In fact, the Bible says you have a new name that you may not even know about: God's Delight.

Thanks be to God.